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DOI
10.1080/15252019.2024.2388644

Publication date
2024

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
Journal of Interactive Advertising

JOURNAL OF INTERACTIVE ADVERTISING
2024, VOL. 24, NO. 3, 203–214
https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2024.2388644

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Followers' Cognitive Elaboration of Sponsored Influencer Content: The Significance of Argument Quality

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ABSTRACT

Social media influencers have emerged as effective brand endorsers, yet a gap remains in understanding their followers' cognitive engagement with sponsored posts. To address this issue, we conducted a study guided by parasocial theories and the elaboration likelihood model (ELM). Follower status (follower/non-follower) and persuasive argument quality (weak/strong) were manipulated among study participants ($N = 163$) to discern the prevailing processing mode triggered by sponsored influencer content. Based on parasocial theories, we predicted that followers who have established parasocial relationships with influencers should show high situational engagement with their content. Our results demonstrated that argument quality influenced followers' brand evaluation and purchase intention, whereas non-followers were unaffected by it. These findings suggest that followers are more likely to elaborate on influencer content compared with non-followers. Interestingly, some signs of biased processing were evident. These results contribute to our understanding of how followers engage with sponsored content and shed light on the mechanisms underlying the persuasiveness of influencer marketing.

KEYWORDS

Social media influencer; elaboration likelihood model; persuasion; biased processing; parasocial relationship

As the influencer landscape continues to expand, influencer marketing solidifies itself as a lasting force rather than a fleeting trend. Projections indicate that the industry's value will surge to $24 billion by 2024, marking a significant increase from its $6.5 billion valuation in 2019 (Dencheva 2024). Today, thousands of micro-, macro-, and mega-influencers are actively engaging with their followers and effectively promoting branded products (Boerman 2020; Kay, Mulcahy, and Parkinson 2020). Academics have recognized the significance of this contemporary form of native advertising, leading to a recent surge in published studies devoted to influencer marketing (Fowler and Thomas 2023; Hudders, De Jans, and De Veirman 2021; Van Reijmersdal et al. 2020).

Based on the considerable impact associated with influencer marketing, numerous studies have already been conducted that manipulated different source variables (e.g., the fit of the influencer; Breves et al. 2019) as well as message characteristics (e.g., the impact of advertising disclosures; Stubb and Colliander 2019) to understand and predict the persuasive effects of sponsored social media content on brand evaluation and purchase intention (for literature reviews, see e.g., Vrontis et al. 2021; Fowler and Thomas 2023). However, although these studies offer important insights into the effectivity of influencer communication, they did not analyze how followers cognitively processed the persuasive appeals; consequently, little is known about the underlying reasons for influencers' persuasive success. Incorporating cognitive processes into influencer research seems highly relevant due to several aspects.

First, by researching the cognitive processes, we can give important implications both to influencers who create the sponsored content as well as to advertisers who want to promote their brand products using influencer marketing. While earlier research on celebrity endorsers suggests that information

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Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at https://doi.org/10.1080/15252019.2024.2388644.

presented by trustworthy sources is unthinkingly accepted (Priester and Petty 2003), it is unclear if this is also true for influencers with whom their followers are more closely connected (Breves et al. 2019; Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget 2020). If followers cognitively elaborate on the influencers' posts, this information is highly relevant for the content creators because some advertising elements might be more effective than others under this condition. For example, in a significant campaign over Christmas, Pamela Reif, renowned as one of Germany's most successful fitness and lifestyle influencers, endorsed a limited-edition hair styling tool, predominantly emphasizing the device's rose gold color in her persuasive appeal (Instagram 2019). However, if her followers were cognitively engaged and critically considered the message, incorporating more substantial arguments, such as detailed technological specifications, might have been more effective (Petty and Cacioppo 1986b).

Second, it seems to be the responsibility of advertising researchers to analyze the reason behind the persuasive power of influencer communication in order to generate solid advice on how to empower consumers and protect them from new forms of subtle advertising. Due to the long-term relationship and the intimate bond between influencers and their followers, the cognitive processing of ads might not be completely objective (Tukachinsky and Sangalang 2016). If this assumption holds true, elements that have been used to protect consumers on social media, such as advertising disclosures, could be failing in their effect (Breves, Amrehn, et al. 2021). While some studies have already shown that the existing bond can alter the effects of influencer communication and reduce persuasive resistance (e.g., Boerman and van Reijmersdal 2019; Breves, Liebers, et al. 2021), further research on the cognitive processes seems necessary to protect consumers and create interventions that successfully raise advertising literacy.

In this paper, we therefore aim to investigate how followers process sponsored influencer posts, and we address the research question of whether the quality of persuasive arguments impacts persuasion. The experimental study that we conducted is situated within the theoretical framework of the elaboration likelihood model (ELM; Petty and Cacioppo 1986a) and the concept of parasocial relationships (Horton and Wohl 1956). Before illustrating the ELM to provide a theoretical basis for predicting cognitive processes during exposure to a sponsored influencer post, the influencer-follower relationships will be described in more detail.

Cognitive Elaboration and Parasocial Phenomena

Establishing Parasocial Interactions and Relationships with Influencer

While followers might be confronted with content produced by influencers several times a day, influencers might not personally know or be aware of each media user that has subscribed to their channels. Although influencer might sometimes react to their followers' messages and share or like some of their content, the interaction between them can still be understood as unbalanced. Considering that popular influencers have several hundred thousand or even millions of followers on their social media channels, this imbalance seems inevitable (Campbell and Farrell 2020; Vrontis et al. 2021). Consequently, the type of interaction should not be considered social by nature but parasocial instead (Breves, Liebers, et al. 2021). The term *parasocial interaction* refers to the audiences' momentary one-sided and non-reciprocal engagement with a media character, which can include *cognitive* (e.g., thinking about something the influencer did), *affective* (e.g., feeling sympathy for the influencer), and *conative* (e.g., laughing during the influencer's Instagram story) elements (Horton and Wohl 1956; Schramm and Hartmann 2008).

Several studies have analyzed under which circumstances media users are likely to parasocially interact with media characters and have reported source and message characteristics that can intensify the process (Liebers and Schramm 2019). For instance, media users are more likely to parasocially interact with media personalities if they address them directly, are perceived as attractive, and give the users intimate glances into their private life (e.g., Bond 2016; Hartmann and Goldhoorn 2011; Knoll et al. 2015). Based on the parasocial engagement model by Gleich (1997), an earlier relationship with the media character should furthermore enhance the situational parasocial interaction (Breves and Liebers 2024). This parasocial relationship refers to the cross-situational relation between media users and characters and is not limited to the interaction during media reception.

While long-term followers should have had enough time to build a stable parasocial relationship with the influencer, social media users who have not subscribed to the influencer should not yet have sufficient parasocial contacts to have established an intensive parasocial relationship (Breves, Amrehn, et al. 2021; Breves and Liebers 2024). A recent study by Breves and Liebers (2024) could experimentally validate this

theoretical assumption. Individuals following influencers for middle and long durations before partaking in the study reported more intense parasocial relationships with the influencer than non- or short-term followers. As a consequence, they also indicated stronger situational engagement with the influencer. Based on the positive influence of parasocial relationships on situational engagement, the cognitive elaboration should differ between followers and non-followers (Breves, Liebers, et al. 2021; Tukachinsky and Sangalang 2016), as we expect followers to process influencer content more elaborately than non-followers. We will use the ELM to explain this assumption in more detail (Petty and Cacioppo 1986b).

Cognitive Elaboration of Influencer Content

As one of the most popular persuasion models, the ELM has been established to—and used to explain why—certain message characteristics (e.g., the quality of persuasive arguments) are not always consistent in their persuasiveness (Petty, Briñol, and Tormala 2002; Petty and Cacioppo 1986b). The model postulates that two different modes of information processing exist, which can be understood as two ends of a continuum. While the first mode (*central mode*) is deliberate and effortful, the second mode (*peripheral mode*) demands fewer cognitive resources and is thus less analytical. Both the individuals' motivation (e.g., issue involvement) and the ability (e.g., available cognitive resources) determine if they will engage in effortful central processing or take the less analytical peripheral route (Petty and Cacioppo 1986b).

If media users are unconcerned and do not pay attention to the persuasive message, cues such as the number of arguments or source characteristics are used to evaluate the message and the persuasive topic. Consider the study by Lim et al. (2020) as an example to illustrate peripheral processing. The researchers could show that the color green, which is associated with environmental friendliness, enhanced persuasive effectiveness of green advertising appeals, as long as participants were not scrutinizing the message too elaborately.

However, if both processing motivation and ability are high, media users tend to elaborate cognitively on the message content and employ the central processing mode (Petty and Cacioppo 1986b). If this is the case, the quality of the *persuasive arguments*, which are pieces of information relevant to determine the assets of the taken standpoint, gain more importance. This result was validated by a meta-analysis conducted by Carpenter (2015). For individuals who used peripheral processing, strong arguments were only slightly more persuasive than weak ones. Individuals who engaged in central processing however, considered strong arguments to be more persuasive than weak arguments.

Currently, it is believed that individuals who are scrolling through social media experience high levels of cognitive load and do not have a lot of cognitive resources left, and are thus mainly processing the content peripherally (Lang 2000; Pittman and Haley 2023). However, both parasocial interactions and relationships wield significant influence on media content processing and impact. As previously demonstrated, more intense parasocial relationships are correlated with stronger situational interactions with the character (Breves and Liebers 2024). Additionally, higher levels of parasocial interactions have been associated with increased attention toward media figures (Tukachinsky and Stever 2019).

Given that parasocial interactions function as situational media involvement and character engagement (e.g., Brown 2015; Tukachinsky and Tokunaga 2013), it is reasonable to expect increased cognitive resource allocation for message processing, in line with the ELM (Petty and Cacioppo 1986b). Consequently, followers who experience stronger levels of situational parasocial engagement due to more intense parasocial relationships are likely to be motivated to employ central processing. Conversely, unconcerned non-followers of the influencer who do not specifically allocate their limited cognitive resources to the influencer post are expected to exhibit peripheral processing.

To decipher which of the two modes is dominant during information processing, empirical studies have experimentally manipulated the quality of persuasive arguments. If strong arguments have a higher persuasive impact than weak arguments, the media users most likely employed the central mode of processing. Under conditions of enhanced cognitive elaboration, weak arguments, in turn, can lead to "boomerang" effects, and negative change might occur (Park et al. 2007; Petty and Cacioppo 1986b). For instance, in a study that used several persuasive topics, Park et al. (2007) confronted student participants with arguments in favor of a complete ban on carrying cell phones in the classroom. The results validated that whereas strong arguments produced greater attitude change in the direction of message recommendations, boomerang effects were observed for weak arguments. Therefore, the attitude of individuals who are confronted with weak arguments and engage in central

processing are believed to be more negative compared with those who receive weak arguments and only engage in peripheral processing (Petty and Cacioppo 1986b).

In sum, we expect that follower status serves as a contingent moderator of the effects of argument quality on brand evaluation and purchase intention. In order words, the positive effects of argument quality on brand evaluation and purchase intention are expected to be isolated to followers. The following contingent interaction hypothesis is formulated:

> H1: Follower status moderates the effect of argument quality on (a) brand evaluation, and (b) purchase intention, such that followers find strong arguments more persuasive than weak arguments, whereas non-followers show no significant difference in brand evaluation and purchase intention between strong and weak arguments.

Methods

Study Design and Procedure

To test our hypothesis and explore the influence of follower status and persuasive argument quality on cognitive processing among study participants ($N = 163$), we employed an online experiment with a 2 (follower status: non-follower vs. follower) × 2 (persuasive argument quality: weak vs. strong) between-subjects design. The dichotomous independent variables were the participants' follower status (non-follower/follower) and the quality of the persuasive arguments (weak/strong). The manipulation of the follower status will be explained in more detail in the next paragraph on the general procedure, before describing the pretest that was used to generate the persuasive arguments.

After participants had opened the online questionnaire, created using Unipark survey-software, they were welcomed and informed about the procedure of the study. Afterwards, they were asked to give informed consent. To manipulate the follower status, the methodological approach by Breves, Amrehn, et al. (2021) was employed, and participants were presented with the names of six popular German mega-influencers (each with at least 1.4 million followers).[1] Four well-known female and two well-known male Instagram influencers who focused on lifestyle topics were chosen to make it easier to recruit eligible participants and to improve the generalizability of the results. Participants either randomly received the instruction to pick one of the six influencers that they did not follow (*non-follower condition*) or to pick one of the influencers whom they were currently following (*follower condition*). An overview of which influencers were selected per condition can be found in Supplemental Online Appendix Table A1. Randomization was done using the survey software's randomization feature. Based on their selection, they were presented with the screenshot of the respective influencer's Instagram profile. Directly afterwards, their level of parasocial relationships with the influencer was measured.

Participants were presented with the sponsored post of their chosen influencer that either included strong or weak arguments. To increase the external validity of the study, an existing brand was chosen to be included in the sponsored post. The German brand *Got Bag*, which produces bags made of plastic that was collected from the ocean, was used in this study. The sustainable bag was designed in a neutral color as well as shape and should therefore be relevant for all genders. Instagram posts of the respective influencer that looked rather similar were researched and altered to include the bags, while the texts that were displayed in the sponsored posts were completely created by the researchers. A pretest was performed to generate and validate the persuasive arguments, which will be described in more detail in following text.

After viewing the post, the participants were asked about their evaluation of the brand *Got Bag* and their purchase intention. Lastly, participants answered demographic questions as well as questions about their Instagram use and were debriefed. It was explicitly stressed that the researchers, instead of the respective influencer, created the Instagram posts and that the argument quality was manipulated. They did not receive any form of compensation for participating in the study.

Pretest

Two versions of the sponsored post that differed concerning the persuasive strength of the included arguments were created by using a focus group discussion and pretest. We assembled the focus group mainly to ask them about aspects that are important to them regarding sustainable bags so we could create ideas for the arguments. Altogether, five arguments were generated by the researchers based on the suggestions of the focus group ($N = 4$; $M = 24.5$; $SD = 2.69$; 75% female), which incorporated relevant aspects of the sustainable bag, such as fair wages and charitable contributions by the brand. In line with the recommendations by Hoeken, Hornikx, and Linders (2020), the arguments included either very convincing or less convincing facts and were otherwise formulated as similarly as possible.

After the arguments were generated based on the discussion with the focus group, a pretest was employed. An online questionnaire was generated that used a between-subject design, which ensured that participants saw either the strong or the weak version of the respective argument. After three participants were removed because they indicated low attention scores (< 5 on a 7-point Likert scale), the final sample of the pretest consisted of 60 voluntary participants who were recruited via social media and did not receive any form of compensation (M_{age} = 26.28; SD = 6.28; 70% female).

The strong and weak arguments, which can be found in Supplemental Online Appendix Table A2, were rated by the participants of the pretest using a 7-point-Likert scale with values from 1 (*not at all convincing*) to 7 (*very convincing*). As advised by Hoeken, Hornikx, and Linders (2020), who stressed the need to consider normative criteria while manipulating argument quality, the participants also rated the perceived realism of the arguments to ensure that the strength of the arguments was not confounded with the level of realism. Three of the five arguments differed in their perceived quality but were perceived similarly regarding their realism and were thus integrated into the stimulus material. This approach means that the post with the high argument quality included three strong arguments, while the post with the low argument quality incorporated a weak version of the same three arguments. The final captions can be found in Table 1; copies of the Instagram posts are available upon request.

Participants

A total of 233 participants were recruited from social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and SurveyCircle, an online platform that provides community credits. For this study, four student assistants aided in participant recruitment by sharing the study link within their networks, resulting in the utilization of a convenience sample. Additionally, to expand outreach to the followers of the six influencers, direct messages containing invitations and the study link were sent to Instagram users who commented on the influencers' posts. Participants who were not following at least one influencer on Instagram ($n = 23$) or did not regularly use Instagram (less than once a week; $n = 17$) were excluded from further analyses.

Furthermore, participants were asked to indicate how attentively they had answered the questions and were excluded if they indicate low attention scores (< 4 on a 7-point Likert scale, $n = 11$). After additionally excluding participants who, in contrast to the given instruction, indicated that they followed/did not follow the chosen influencer ($n = 19$), the final sample consisted of 163 participants with a mean age of 24.58 (SD = 4.28) years. Most participants identified as female (79.8%) or male (19.6%), and one participant identified as diverse. Approximately 83% indicated that they had completed high school or possessed a higher educational degree.

The participants who were randomly assigned to select an influencer they were currently following indicated that they have been following the influencer for at least 1 month (8%), several months (10%), or more than 6 months (82%). As intended by the randomization of participants, the appropriate tests indicated no differences between the two groups (non-follower/follower) in terms of age ($t(135.63) = -1.64$; $p = .103$), gender (χ^2 (2, $N = 163$) = 1.42; $p = .597$), length of daily Instagram use ($t(128.97) = -0.91$; $p = .364$), and brand familiarity ($t(161) = 0.78$; $p = .435$). As shown in

Table 1. Strong and weak versions of the persuasive arguments used for the sponsored posts.

	Strong Arguments	Weak Arguments
Argument 1	The bag was certified by the independent institute for sustainability.	The bag was *partially* certified by the independent institute for sustainability.
Argument 2	The bags are fair: The producers in Indonesia receive wages *clearly exceeding* the minimum wage required by the state.	The bags are fair: The producers in Indonesia receive the minimum wage required by the state.
Argument 3	Every year, *10*% of the turnover is donated to the organization "clean the ocean."	Every year, *1*% of the turnover is donated to the organization "clean the ocean."
Final caption of the sponsored post	Ad// Have you heard from @gotbag yet? The sustainable rolltop bags from @gotbag were certified by the independent institute for sustainability. Furthermore, the bags are fair: The producers in Indonesia receive wages *clearly exceeding* the minimum wage required by the state. Every year, *10*% of the turnover is donated to the organization "clean the ocean," which fights for a plastic-free ocean. You have to check out the shop by @gotbag! ☺	Ad// Have you heard from @gotbag yet? The sustainable rolltop bags from @gotbag were *partially* certified by the independent institute for sustainability. Furthermore, the bags are fair: The producers in Indonesia receive the minimum wage required by the state. Every year, *1*% of the turnover is donated to the organization "clean the ocean," which fights for a plastic-free ocean. You have to check out the shop by @gotbag! ☺

Note: Italics were used in this table to emphasize the difference between the arguments.

Table 1, brand familiarity and endorser-product fit correlated with the dependent variables brand evaluation and purchase intention and were therefore included as covariates in the analyses.

Measurements

In the following paragraphs, the measurement scales will be described. The inter-construct correlations are reported in Table 2 and all items can be found in Supplemental Online Appendix Table A3. Throughout the whole questionnaire, 7-point Likert scales (*strongly disagree—strongly agree*) were employed.

Parasocial Relationship

The level of parasocial relationship with the influencer was measured using the friendship dimensions (13 items; Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$; $M = 3.40$; $SD = 1.32$) of the multiple-parasocial relationships scale (Tukachinsky 2010). For instance, the participants rated how likely they were to give the influencer emotional support.

Persuasive Effectiveness

To measure persuasive effectiveness, participants' evaluation of the brand *Got Bag* (5 items; Cronbach's $\alpha = .97$; $M = 3.98$; $SD = 1.73$) and their purchase intention (5 items; Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$; $M = 3.30$; $SD = 1.60$) were operationalized. The two scales were based on Spears and Singh (2004) and adapted for the study. For instance, participants were asked if *Got Bag* appealed to them (i.e., brand evaluation) and how likely they were to use the brand product (i.e., purchase intention).

Table 2. Correlations between the variables.

	Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	Parasocial relationship	–						
2	Product evaluation	.17*	–					
3	Purchase intention	.24**	.82**	–				
4	Brand familiarity	.13	.54**	.66**	–			
5	Endorser-product fit	.35**	.32**	.24**	.09	–		
6	Age	−.18*	−.20*	−.20*	−.01	.00	–	
7	Gender[a]	.01	−.04	−.00	−.15	.01	.04	–

Note: $N = 163$.
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.
[a]1 = male, 2 = female.

In addition, participants were asked how familiar they were with the brand *Got Bag* ($M = 2.47$; $SD = 2.08$) and how well the influencer and the brand product fit together (Till and Busler 2000; 3 items; Cronbach's $\alpha = .95$, $M = 3.85$; $SD = 1.58$).

Results

Manipulation Check

To validate the underlying assumption that followers have formed more intense parasocial relationships with the influencers than non-followers, an independent samples *t*-test was conducted. As expected, followers reported significantly higher levels of parasocial relationship ($n = 96$; $M = 3.96$; $SD = 1.11$) than non-followers ($n = 67$; $M = 2.61$; $SD = 1.18$; $t(161) = 7.46$; $p < .001$; Cohen's $d = 1.14$). Consequently, the manipulation was successful.

Hypothesis Testing

To test our hypothesis, a two-factorial multivariate analysis of covariance was estimated using brand familiarity and product-endorser fit as covariates and brand evaluation as well as purchase intention as dependent variables. The main and interaction effects of the two experimental factors are displayed in Table 3, and the descriptive values are displayed in Table 4.

We expected follower status to be a contingent moderator of the effects of argument quality on brand evaluation and purchase intention. In line with our expectations, significant interaction effects were found

Table 4. Overview descriptive statistics.

Variables	Argument Quality	Follower		Non-Follower		Total	
		M	SD	*M*	SD	*M*	SD
Brand evaluation	Weak	3.90	1.68	3.80	1.73	3.85	1.69
	Strong	4.41	1.70	3.54	1.74	4.10	1.76
	Total	4.20	1.70	3.68	1.73	3.98	1.73
Purchase intention	Weak	3.28	1.59	3.17	1.68	3.23	1.62
	Strong	3.69	1.53	2.78	1.57	3.36	1.60
	Total	3.52	1.56	2.99	1.63	3.30	1.60

Note: The scales ranged from 1 to 7. $N = 163$.

Table 3. Main and interaction effects of follower status and argument quality.

Variables	Brand evaluation					Purchase intention				
	MS	*df*	*F*	*p*	η_p^2	*MS*	*df*	*F*	*p*	η_p^2
Argument quality	1.08	1	0.56	.454	.004	0.11	1	0.08	.776	.001
Follower status	0.53	1	0.28	.601	.002	2.14	1	1.58	.210	.010
Argument quality × follower status	7.62	1	3.98	.048	.025	7.86	1	5.82	.017	.036
Brand familiarity	135.21	1	70.58	< .001	.310	178.38	1	131.97	< .001	.457
Endorser-product fit	25.29	1	13.20	< .001	.078	6.74	1	4.99	.027	.031
Error	1.92	157				1.35	157			

Note: Brand familiarity and endorser-product fit were included as covariates. $N = 163$.

between argument quality and follower status on brand evaluation ($F = 4.29$; $p = .040$; $\eta_p^2 = .027$) and purchase intention ($F = 6.10$; $p = .015$; $\eta_p^2 = .037$). These effects sizes can be considered small, which is common for advertising effects, according to a meta-analysis of advertising effects (Eisend and Tarrahi 2016).

Bonferroni-corrected pairwise comparisons showed that followers evaluated the brand more positively if they were confronted with strong rather than with weak arguments ($M_{diff} = 0.61$; $SE = 0.28$; $p = .034$; see Figure 1). However, non-followers did not evaluate the brand more positively if they were confronted with strong rather than with weak arguments ($M_{diff} = -0.28$; $SE = 0.34$; $p = .417$). Similar effects were found for purchase intention (see Figure 2); followers indicated stronger purchase intention if confronted with strong arguments versus weak arguments ($M_{diff} = 0.50$; $SE = 0.24$; $p = .038$). However, there was no significant difference for non-followers concerning the impact of weak and strong arguments ($M_{diff} = -0.40$; $SE = 0.28$; $p = .166$). In summary, if followers were confronted with strong arguments, they indicated more positive brand evaluation and purchase intention than followers who read the post with weak arguments. Compared with non-followers, who were not influenced by argument quality, followers presumably processed the information more elaborately due to higher levels of parasocial engagement. Consequently, the reported results are in line with the predictions of H1.

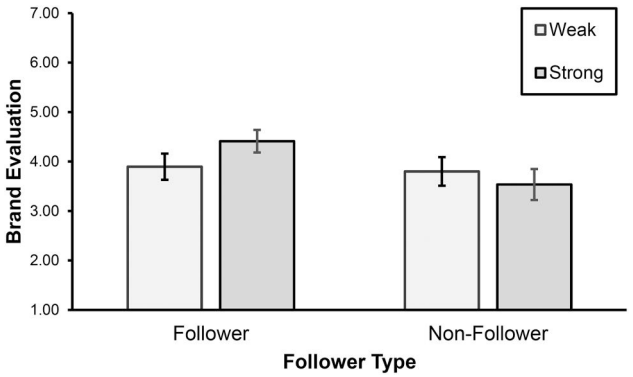

Figure 1. Interaction effect of argument quality and follower status on brand evaluation. Values range from 1 (low evaluation) to 7 (high evaluation). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals, and brand familiarity and endorser-product fit were included as covariates. $N = 163$.

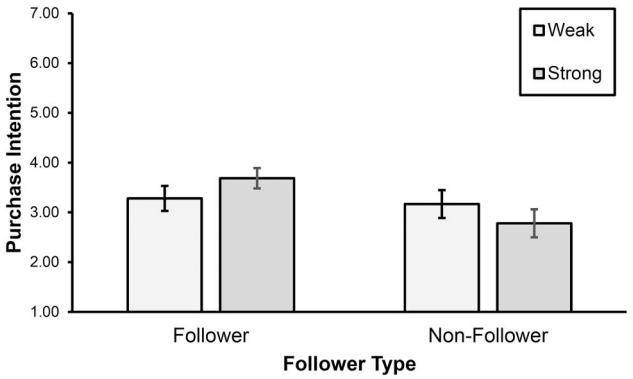

Figure 2. Interaction effect of argument quality and follower status on purchase intention. Values range from 1 (low intention) to 7 (high intention). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals, and brand familiarity and endorser-product fit were included as covariates. $N = 163$.

Discussion

In our study, we aimed to investigate how individuals process persuasive messages from influencers they follow, with a specific focus on the interaction with argument quality. Based on our findings, several main conclusions can be drawn.

The results show that when followers are exposed to compelling arguments, they are more inclined to form favorable brand evaluation and express greater intent to purchase the promoted product compared with exposure to weaker arguments. This finding underscores the pivotal role of argument quality in shaping followers' perceptions of the brand and their purchase intention. Furthermore, our results indicate that followers actively engage with influencer content. This engagement is evidenced by their sensitivity to the quality of arguments presented. This active cognitive engagement suggests a deeper level of processing, consistent with the ELM principles. It implies that followers are likely to employ central processing strategies when evaluating influencer messages, carefully assessing the content and its implications.

These findings may challenge some preconceptions, particularly the notion that influencers merely serve as heuristic cues or that the processing of social media content is generally superficial. Instead, our results suggest that followers are actively involved in evaluating influencer content, demonstrating a level of engagement and cognitive processing that goes beyond mere peripheral assessment.

In line with our findings, elements known to enhance persuasion under central processing should amplify the effectiveness of influencer messages. This observation resonates with previous research findings in influencer marketing. For instance, studies have shown that transparent advertising disclosures and engaging with audience comments can act as compelling arguments, contributing to the persuasive impact

of influencer content (Breves, Amrehn, et al. 2021; Hudders, Lou, and de Brabandere 2022; Xiao 2023). Overall, our study contributes to a deeper understanding of how followers process influencer content and underscores the importance of argument quality in shaping their responses. By recognizing the role of central processing in influencer marketing, marketers can better leverage persuasive strategies to engage and influence their target audience.

However, it is important to note an unexpected trend observed in the mean values (see Figures 1 and 2). Upon examining the effect of weak arguments on followers' brand evaluation, they did not appear to be lower than those for non-followers.[2] Based on the ELM propositions, one would expect followers confronted with weak arguments to exhibit more negative evaluations and lower purchase intention due to their central processing of the message, compared with non-followers. The fact that this expected result was not observed indicates that the central processing might not have been entirely objective but slightly biased instead.

The possibility of biased elaboration has been included as one of the ELM postulates and describes that, under specific conditions, the media user might be especially motivated to generate a particular kind of thought (Petty and Cacioppo 1986b). Followers—who foster close and trusting relationships with influencers—seem to be inclined to generate supportive thoughts. Nonetheless, the quality of the arguments is still important because it seems easier to generate supportive thoughts if confronted with strong rather than weak arguments. However, under conditions of positively biased processing, weak arguments do not seem to lead to negative change (Breves 2021; Petty and Cacioppo 1986b).

Building on the findings of our study, we tentatively infer that followers are inclined to opt for biased central processing when encountering sponsored content from familiar and trusted influencers. This positive bias in followers' processing of influencer content is consistent with the results of other empirical studies on influencer marketing that integrated parasocial relationships into their designs. Several studies have corroborated this positive bias, showing that factors which would typically diminish persuasive effectiveness, such as lower perceived influencer-brand fit (Breves et al. 2019), brand transgressions (Aw and Labrecque 2022), and persuasion knowledge (Boerman and van Reijmersdal 2019; Borchers, Hagelstein, and Beckert 2022; Breves, Amrehn, et al. 2021; Hwang and Zhang 2018) were less detrimental to persuasive outcomes. These findings underscore the robust influence of parasocial relationships on followers' responses to influencer content, highlighting the need for further research in this area.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Our findings bear significance for researchers, influencers, advertisers, and consumer advocates alike. A notable theoretical contribution lies in the integration of influencer communication with the ELM principles, affirming that followers are inclined to engage in cognitive elaboration with familiar influencers. In contrast to conventional celebrity advertising, in which processing may be predominantly peripheral (Priester and Petty 2003) influencers elicit a deeper level of engagement. Unlike traditional celebrities, whose endorsements may lack strong parasocial bonds due to perceived dissimilarities or credibility issues, social media influencers foster robust relationships with their followers through consistent interactions (Lou 2021; Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget 2020). Consequently, it is essential to exercise caution when directly applying findings from studies on celebrity endorsers to the influencer context. This distinction highlights the need for tailored strategies and approaches in influencer marketing research and practice.

Furthermore, our study revealed evidence of non-objective central processing of sponsored posts. Through the lens of biased central processing, we can elucidate the influence of argument quality on persuasive effectiveness, in line with the ELM propositions (Petty and Cacioppo 1986b). Followers, shaped by their experience with the influencer and the positive character schema, are likely more inclined to generate thoughts that support persuasion rather than opposing it. Consequently, strong arguments exert a greater impact, whereas weak ones lack both persuasion potential and the likelihood of eliciting boomerang effects. These findings represent a significant contribution to parasocial engagement and influencer communication theories, enhancing our understanding of previous research in influencer marketing (Tukachinsky, Walter, and Saucier 2020; Vrontis et al. 2021).

From an advertising perspective, our research holds implications for influencers crafting sponsored content and for advertisers leveraging influencer marketing. Whereas information from trustworthy sources is often accepted without much scrutiny in celebrity

endorsements (Priester and Petty 2003), this dynamic shifts when it comes to influencers with stronger follower connections (Breves et al. 2019; Schouten, Janssen, and Verspaget 2020). The cognitive elaboration of followers necessitates tailored advertising elements for heightened effectiveness, a crucial insight for content creators.

For instance, revisiting the example mentioned in the introduction, Pamela Reif promoted a limited-edition hair styler in a significant Christmas campaign, emphasizing its rose gold color in her persuasive appeal (Instagram 2019). However, considering that followers are likely deeply engaged in parasocial relationships and attentively read the message, integrating substantial arguments such as grounded information about the technological specifications could have been more impactful (Petty and Cacioppo 1986b). In our study, well-founded arguments significantly enhanced persuasive effects, underscoring the importance of using compelling arguments in influencer appeals rather than superficial information. While weak arguments may not elicit negative effects due to processing bias, they fail to fully leverage the message's persuasive potential.

Limitations and Future Research

Although our study offers valuable insights, certain limitations warrant consideration. First, we employed the persuasive impact of varying argument strength as a surrogate measure for gauging participants' level of cognitive elaboration. This approach is common and boasts numerous advantages, including its high objectivity and minimal intrusiveness; however, it is worth noting that alternative methods for assessing cognitive engagement also exist (Petty and Cacioppo 1986a). These methods, such as the thought-listing procedure or the utilization of subjective measurement scales, may yield different results (Greene 2015; Shen and Seung 2018). Therefore, in future studies, incorporating these diverse measurements would be beneficial in fortifying the assertions put forth by this paper regarding the processing disparities between followers and non-followers.

Secondly, we employed a manipulation with a binary categorization for follower status in line with the approach by Breves, Amrehn, et al. (2021), wherein participants were asked to select an influencer they were following or not following. However, it is worth noting that the duration of the following relationship likely has a significant impact on its strength. Although the manipulation-check was successful, the follower condition reported values slightly below the midpoint of the parasocial relationship scale. If we had investigated long-term followers separately, their values would have probably been higher than in combination with the short-term followers. As a consequence of stronger parasocial relationships, long-term followers may be more deeply influenced than short-term followers (Breves and Liebers 2024). Therefore, it is important to consider follower duration in future research endeavors.

Several other research gaps can also be identified. What seems to be especially important in influencer research is the integration of user characteristics into the experimental designs. The positively biased central processing elicited by high levels of parasocial relationships might be able to persuade individuals who are typically quite resistant (Koniak and Cwalina 2022). For instance, participants who feel strongly against the persuasive topic might reconsider their attitudes or their behavior if confronted with a persuasive appeal by a trusted influencer. This reaction might be especially relevant for communication disciplines aside from advertising, such as political or environmental communications. For instance, people who report extreme political orientations or are hesitant to adapt their consumption behavior in a sustainable way might be influenced more strongly by such an appeal compared with other forms of persuasion. Additionally, it might be interesting to incorporate social media platforms aside from Instagram into future research, such as TikTok, Twitch, or YouTube, because the results should not be directly transferable due to different levels of platform and advertising engagement (Voorveld et al. 2018).

Finally, whereas in the current study we discuss parasocial interaction as probable explanation for the effect of follower status, parasocial interaction was not included as variable in our model. Future research should further explore the role of parasocial interaction by incorporating it as a mediator of the effect of follower status on brand evaluation and purchase intention and a moderator of the effects of argument quality on brand evaluation and purchase intention.

Concluding Remark

In summary, influencer advertising emerges as an effective type of advertising. Individuals seem to display cognitive engagement and contemplation of message content, yet their evaluation lacks critical scrutiny. While many advantages linked with central processing are pertinent to influencer communication,

the corresponding downsides—like boomerang effects—seem to dissipate.

Transitioning from a business standpoint to consumer advocacy, our findings stress the need for regulations and restrictions. The inherent positive bias in followers' cognitive processing could heighten their vulnerability and susceptibility to persuasive messages. This potential raises ethical concerns regarding the endorsement of unethical or unhealthy products (e.g., unhealthy food, alcohol, tobacco, gambling) by influencers, as well as products targeted at particularly susceptible groups, such as children (De Jans, Hudders, and Constandt 2024; Packer et al. 2022; Pitt et al. 2024; Vassey and Unger 2023). Legal loopholes are prevalent and are often exploited by companies through online and influencer marketing (Van Berlo and Bock 2023). Therefore, we strongly advocate for effective interventions by consumer advocates and policymakers to establish robust guidelines and restrictions concerning influencer marketing for harmful products on social media platforms (Vassey and Unger 2023).

Notes

1. Bianca Heinicke (7,700,000 followers on Instagram, as of March 2021); Pamela Reif (7,500,000 followers); Stefanie Giesinger (3,900,000 followers); Julia Beautx (2,900,000 followers); Julian Claßen (5,500,000 followers); and Sami Slimani (1,400,000 followers).
2. A post-hoc pairwise comparison revealed that the influence of weak arguments did not differ between followers and non-followers for both brand evaluation (M_{diff} = 0.36; SE = 0.32; p = .263) and purchase intention (M_{diff} = 0.24; SE = 0.27; p = .380).

Disclosure Statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Ethics Statement

The study was designed and conducted in Germany. Please note that it is not mandatory (and rather unusual) to consult an ethical committee for conducting studies at German Universities unless potential physical or psychological harm of participants is expected. Hence, there is no ethics approval for this study—however, we conducted our research in line with the Declaration of Helsinki.

Funding

This work was not supported by grants or funding. There are no financial interests or benefits dependent on this manuscript.

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Data Availability Statement

The data associated with this manuscript have been gathered at the former affiliation of the authors Priska Breves and Nicole Liebers (University of Wuerzburg, Germany, Institute Human-Computer-Media) and are available upon request.

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